RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A PANACEA FOR RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

The pluralistic nature of the Nigeria society is meant to be a factor that can enhance peaceful coexistence among the people. In the recent times, religion, instead of shaping and producing responsible adherents, has been a major cause of unrest in Nigeria. This is due to lack of proper religious education, hence religious intolerance. This paper seeks to emphasize the need for proper and effective religious education which can invariably curb the religious intolerance in Nigeria. This is done by considering the causes of religious intolerance and the roles of religious education in Nigeria. Finally, it is recommended that religious education should be encouraged since it is a panacea to the problem of religious intolerance in Nigeria and religious leaders should review the content of their religious education to reflect the present needs of the Nigeria nation.
Keywords: *Religious education, religious intolerance*

INTRODUCTION

Religion could serve as an instrument for social harmony and a motivation for violence. Religion by its nature is supposed to enlighten, inspire and unify people in any society. It is an irony that it often engenders strife, intolerance and hatred among the religious groups in Nigeria today. The danger posed by

religion has assumed a frightening dimension under which no meaningful development can endure. According to Okoro (2008)cited in Donatus and Nkechi, (2013), 'religion in some quarters and her institution are suspected to be major causes of violence, crises and conflicts not only in the contemporary history but down to the history of development of human society'.

There are disturbing phenomena in the society arising from religion. Religious institutions have great discriminating influences which have often brought about disaffection, apathy and separation among people in the society. Religious intolerance among religionists in society often gives rise to tension and incessant killings. Be this as it may, religious intolerance should not be the life style of Nigerians. The focus of the religiosity which Nigerians display brazenly will have no meaning in as much as they do not appreciate the religion of others. The spirit of live and let live should guide the Nigerian populace.

Suffice to say with strong terms that disagreement is not intolerance. Often times the duo have been mistaken and the former taken to be the later. Disagreement is always verbal and does not necessarily suggest intolerance unless it escalates to infringing upon or violating the rights of others or infringing laws designed to protect the decency, morality and good order of society. Intolerance only comes when physical force is used in the prosecution of the project. When one group attempts to secure the support of the Government in order to achieve goals and to resist that group, one is placed in the position of resisting existing government. This is where intolerance begins (Truth Magazine, 1957).

One could strongly argue that what has been responsible for the uprising in Nigeria is lack of proper and effective religious education that can make adherents tolerant of one another, hence the need for this paper. This paper will seek to examine the concept of religious education, religious in tolerance, religious education in Nigeria, religious intolerance in Nigeria, the consequence of religious intolerance in Nigeria and the role of religious education in Nigeria.

Religious Education

In its loosed and ordinary sense, religious education is the teaching of a particular religion or teachings of religion in general and its varied aspects; its beliefs, devotions, rituals, customs, rites and personal roles (Sunday and Mordi, 2017). Religious education implies a type of education which is largely separate from rigorous academia, which regards religious beliefs as a fundamental tenet and operating modality. Mordi (2015), averred that religious education connotes the dominant academic study, and in typically religious terms, teaches doctrines which refine and define social customs and societal norms as law. Religious education, according to Irika (2014), defines the norms, customs, ethos and the social and ethical norms of any society. Therefore, religious education can be said to been lightenment on various religious institutions given to people with an intention to promote peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance.

Religious Intolerance

According to Donatus and Nkechi (2013), religious intolerance is an expression of a blind and fixed mental and psychological negative attitude towards religious beliefs and practices. In simple terms, religious intolerance or fanaticism is the

inability of an adherent of a particular religion to
acknowledge, accommodate and accept the right of others to
live by another faith different from his own (Douglas, 2012).
Religious intolerance therefore, can be defined as aggressive
disposition to others as a result of one's feeling of religious
superiority to other religions.

Invariably, such an attitude is connected to the conviction
that one's religion is the only divinely ordained path to
spiritual enlightenment and immortality in heaven.
Consequently, adherents become intolerant of other religions
and desire that other religions go into extinction.

Religious Education in Nigeria

Religious Education has played a significant role in curbing
crises in Nigeria in diverse facets of life, this includes:
Education, Economic and Social Political Life, apart from its
moral objectives. The education fostered by religion, also
known as Religious Education, therefore could be a panacea to
the multifarious problems in Nigeria. Mordi, (2015),
maintained that religion, though, a social institution, goes
beyond the social realm. It is supra-sensible and meta-
physical. It deals with neumena as well as phenomena realities.
Through the acts of worship and communication with the
divine, religion makes the power of the divine to come to the
aid of man. Thus through religious activities, neumena unites
with the phenomena to bring down the power of the divine in
favour of mortal beings. Religious practices such as covenant,
oath-taking, moral bond, the deity obligation and devotion add
colour to the functionality of sustainable development (Uche,
2011). If Nigeria must be saved from social decay and
persistent lack of sustainable development as a result of the

multifaceted problems, the social functions of Religious Education should be positively applied and harnessed. This will promote and foster development in all ramifications.

Though religion has caused much harm to the social coexistence of the Nigerian people through undue rivalry and unjustifiable religious killings and fanatical dispositions, engineered by seeming political interests, it has none the less tried to uphold and display some spiritual charisma in Nigeria. By upholding religious education which forms people into good citizens of the Nigerian nation and nation builders, religion has become an agent of mobilization in complex social engagements in Nigeria. It is indisputable that religious education should be the Nigeria's undoing in the 21st century.

Religious Intolerance in Nigeria
Religion in all societies is an instrument of cohesion, unity and progress. It is also used to control the social and spiritual life of the people in a community and in the wider society. Every society has a religion in one form or the other, and as a definition of reality, values and goals (Donatus and Nkechi, 2013).Edlyne (2004), opines thus:

> Religion is a means to perpetuate violence, fueling of ethnic consciousness and solidarity, acquisition .of political power, socio-economic gains, massive killings and the wanton destruction and vandalization of property of those considered infidels or who pay allegiance to other religions. As a means of commanding political legitimacy in Nigeria, it has dictated the pace of the political democratization process which hitherto nurtured ethnic consciousness in the country.

In other words, religious intolerance is a blind refusal to understand and respect views or positions that are opposed to one's cherished religious views. Religious intolerance is an expression of a blind and fixed mental and psychological negative attitude towards religious beliefs and practices. Such negative attitudes are exhibited in situations whereby leaders or groups in any society refuse to understand and respect contrary religious views and practices except the ones they consider to be true. There is religious intolerance when members of a self acclaimed true religion proclaim in practice that persons they consider to be in error have no right to live, no right to legitimate political, social and economic amenities unless they renounce their error and be converted to the supposed true religious views and practices. There is religious intolerance when political leaders or the ruling class overtly or covertly collide with some citizens on purely religious grounds. Under such a situation some citizens are denied their fundamental rights to religious liberty, liberty of religious beliefs and practices. Often, this refusal to understand and accept contrary religious views and practices is accompanied by series of violence and destruction (Gianfranco, 1960 cited in Donatus and Nkechi, 2013).

Religious intolerance is conterminous with religious extremism. Iwe (2000), describes it as:

> An irrational attitude to religion which leads the religionist to the practice of religion beyond the bounds of reason and therefore without moderation. Those who perpetuate intolerance in the practice of religion are fundamentalists and they come as sects and fashion out extreme literal myopic and selfish interpretation of their

scriptures to justify or give credence to their radical and often violent religious activities.

Nigeria as it exists today is a pluralistic society, with different cultural and religious groups. The notion of pluralism as it is needs further explication. Pluralism involves awareness on the fact that there are existential differences in cultural behaviours, philosophy of life and even certain attitudes and values. It further implies a conscious acceptance of those differences as inevitable in the search for significant and relevant common goals, objectives and philosophy which take cognizance of the common needs, aspirations and values of the different ethnic groups within the same Nation (Donatus and Nkechi, 2013).

Worthy of mention is the rise of the Protestant American fundamentalist in the late 19th century and later in Islamic states mostly after those countries have gained independence following the Second World War (Lawrence 1989).

A religious fanatic believes strongly that one's religion is unquestionably superior to other religions. For such a person, those who belong to other faiths are infidels undeserving of eternal bliss in paradise. That is why adherents of every religion who proclaims a strict exclusive disjunction between believers and unbelievers consider it a religious duty to preach and convert non-adherents. But then, uncritical acceptance of the superiority of one's religion is a psychological precondition for religious intolerance, since it motivates and justifies any action taken to further that very religion (Donatus, 2012).Of course, there is nothing wrong in working to promote one's religion. The major problem is that

fanatics go to extremes to promote their religion. Extremists see it as a moral duty, a means of showing genuine piety, to do whatever they deem necessary for achieving a religious cause. If Nigeria must be peaceful and experience any meaningful development, the problem of religious intolerance cannot be handled with a kid-glove, and one sure way of combating this is through the medium of religious education.

The Consequence of Religious Intolerance in Nigeria

Since there is no value-free action, every piece of action carries consequences on the actor and the society at large. Therefore, religious intolerance produces negative effects on the Nigerian socio-economic and political development. Obviously, religious crisis in Nigeria had served and is still serving as a great obstacle to achieving national relevance that would enhance socio-economic and political development. Fundamental among the militating factor against efforts of the people toward nation building is religious crisis with political undertone (Donatus and Nkechi, 2013).

Religious intolerance, more often than not, results in crisis which leads to loss of lives and properties. Arising from those losses deprives the Nation (Nigeria) of much needed manpower. Affected families could have lost either their bread winners or economically useful members (Donatus and Nkechi, 2013). All these have negative impact on the socio-economic wellbeing of the country at large. This implies that religious crisis leads to security risk and fear of uncertainty on both local and foreign investors. This no doubt, has discouraged investments in Nigeria. There are many cases where international and local business enterprises concerned

have pulled out from certain areas considered troubled spots (Donatus and Nkechi, 2013).

Furthermore, religious crises have always been a threat to political stability. In most cases some of these crises are politically motivated. It has been observed that from the time of independence, there has been a gradual and continuing polarization of the country across religious lines. This, directly or indirectly, negatively affect the choice of presidential or governorship candidate, and the major concern is often the professed religion the candidate (Abdul, 2002).

According to Iwe (2000), the intolerant spirit of religious fanatics often led to religious totalitarianism which seeks to impose religious conformity and uniformity on the society by force. This attitude is capable of plunging the country into religious war, as no religious group will be ready to compromise its faith. This can paralyze the country for a long time. This poses strong doubt on the issue of one Nigeria (Donatus and Nkechi, 2013).Without an iota of doubt, religious intolerance caused much havoc to the entire nation and has incapacitated the nation in becoming a habitable place that it is meant to be. There is still hope for Nigeria if only the phenomena of religious education will be taking seriously.

The Role of Religious Education in Nigeria
In Nigeria today, religious education promotes and sustains development through the media of religious values and ethos. Sunday and Mordi, (2017), opines that it is a truism that religious values have permeated the social fabrics of the cultural life of the Nigerian people. Obviously, the role of religious education in making a good citizen out of the

individual cannot be overemphasized. Anyanwu (2009) cited in Donatus and Nkechi, (2013), said that 'religion reminds its adherents that they have dual citizenship, the earthly and heavenly citizenship' Religion contains values that promote human rights, human relationship and human virtues (Donatus and Nkechi, 2013). It is religion that also reminds members of society that they are duty bound to respect legitimate authority and cooperate with it for peace and progress (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Religion enjoins every member of the society to be a good and patriotic citizen. It sees the government of the land as divinely sanctioned institution, and considers morality to be the paramount and so expects all her faithful to be champions and image of good morality in their society (Iwuchukwu, 1990).

Religious education is a very potent tool for nation building. This is observably clear from the study of European history. From the period of the scholastics to the beginning of the 18th century, education and politics and other socio-cultural institutions of human endeavour were in the hands of the church. The church encouraged and promoted learning, built schools and learning centres where religious and secular education was taught. The classical and Greek philosophies of Plato, Aristotle and other oriental writers were promoted and preserved by the church. The writings of churchmen like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, Albert the Great and a host of others are still relevant today. On the moral front, church functionaries served as both moral guides to kings and legal consultants. Bad and despotic kings were deposed and excommunicated by the church to give a sigh of relief to the masses. The church also championed technology (as it was known then), monks wrote and copied the biblical

manuscripts and other ancient writings with hands and preserved them (Sunday and Mordi, 2017).

Religious education is also an instrument of social order. Through the teaching and promotion of religious traditions, restrictions are made; prohibitions and peace drives are encouraged. In this way, law and order are maintained and these are essential ingredients for sustainable development. No country can develop under tension, disorder and chaos. By preaching peace and obedience to the law of the land, religious education promotes order which snow-balls into a favourable atmosphere for business to thrive. In this way, religious education helps to bring about sustainable development in Nigeria (Sunday and Mordi, 2017). On a whole, religious education cannot be reduced to the background if Nigeria must thrive and soar to compete in the comity of nations.

CONCLUSION

Religious education is a powerful force in Nigeria with identifiable social functions. These functions could be weakened by the dysfunctional roles of some religious fanatics. However, the functional role of religious education in Nigeria is so much overwhelming that the negative tendencies of some misguided religious practitioners could be overlooked. As a force to reckon with, religious education performs the role of social control, offers social services and teaches social coexistence, moral values and integration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of what has been discussed so far, the following recommendations are made:

1. Religious education should be encouraged since it is a panacea to the problem of religious intolerance in Nigeria.
2. Religious education teaches social coexistence by preaching the brotherhood of all human beings, love and respect for human persons. It fosters peace and unity among people. This peace, unity and love are very essential ingredients for sustainable development in any society. For this reason it should be encouraged.
3. Religious leaders should review the content of their religious education to reflect the present needs of the Nigeria nation.

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